



# It Takes a Village



Most of us tend to take high school for granted. Not Phillip McClain.

Phillip has cerebral palsy, which has caused paralysis of his legs and hands.

While his friends were going to class and making plans for the future, he was undergoing one surgery after another. Several were experimental and required long hours of rehabilitation. As a result, Phillip got so far behind in school that he couldn't graduate.

Knowing how important that high school diploma was, Phillip tried several times to get it through the GED program. But there were always obstacles that kept him from achieving his dream.

Despite the setbacks, he never gave up on the dream. When he was in his mid-30s, Phillip moved to Russellville, where he worked with the Russellville School District Adult Education Center to once again try for his high school diploma.

"Little did I know it was going to take five years to do that," he says.

"He had a lot of ups and downs on his roller coaster ride," Suzanne Ames, a GED examiner in Russellville, admits.



*Susan Straight, left, and DWE's Janice Hanlon help Phillip McClain celebrate his success at the GED Examiners Conference.*

Because of the ups and downs, Phillip discovered first hand that it often takes a village to help a person achieve a dream.

For Phillip, the village started with the staff at the

adult ed center. Over the years they became a family with Phillip celebrating Thanksgiving and Christmas at the home of Pat Collins, director of the center.

The village grew when Phillip was assigned Susan Straight as his "staff" through Friendship Community Care, a private, nonprofit group that serves people with developmental disabilities.

Pat says Susan was the turning point for Phillip. She attended classes with Phillip, serving as his hands and helping him catch up on lessons he'd missed. She also helped Phillip set reachable goals to prepare him for the GED test. "She told him this was a goal that was going to be accomplished – no ifs, ands, or buts," Pat says.

At 39, Phillip took the GED test. Because of his disability, the adult ed center provided him with accommodations; he was given more time to take the test, and Pat served as his scribe.

When the adult ed staff learned of Phillip's passing scores, "we cried," Suzanne says. "It was a very momentous occasion for us."

As soon as Phillip got that coveted high school diploma, he set a new goal – college.

Once again, his village grew as Arkansas Rehabilitation Services (ARS) stepped in to help him major in rehabilitation sciences at Arkansas Tech in Russellville.

Today, with Susan's assistance, continued encouragement from his "family" at the adult ed center, and aid from ARS, Phillip is tackling his new dream.

In the end, he hopes to be part of the village for someone else. "I'm trying to give back a little of what people have given to me," he says.